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Advisor: Lucinda MacKethan, Emerita Professor of English, North Carolina State University, National Humanities Center Fellow©2014 National Humanities Center Lesson Contents Warning: This lesson includes language within the text reflective of the time in which the text was written. This language is now considered offensive. In To Kill a Mockingbird what does Atticus Finch's relationship with the minor but important character Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose suggest about the quality of his moral vision? Understanding In To Kill a Mockingbird Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose embodies and gives public voice to the values and attitudes of the Old South. The way the novel's protagonist Atticus Finch responds to her suggests that he lacks the critical perspective needed to acknowledge the depth and pervasiveness of his community's racism. Harper Lee, To Kill A Mockingbird, chapter 11. Text Type Fiction Text Complexity Grades 11-CCR complexity band. For more information on text complexity see these resources from achievethecore.org. Click here for standards and skills for this lesson. Teacher's Note (Page numbers refer to the 1982 Grand Central Publishing paperback edition.) The publication of Go Set a Watchman in 2015 focused considerable attention on the moral vision of Atticus Finch. Readers who found him to be an exemplar of tolerance and courage in To Kill a Mockingbird were shocked to hear him voice racist views in Watchman. How could the character who was so enlightened in his original incarnation, set in the 1930s, become so bigoted in his second coming, set in the 1950s? Readers and critics scrutinized Mockingbird to see if the Atticus who defended Tom Robinson contained the seeds of the Atticus who twenty years later joined the Klan-like Citizens' Council. They might profitably have focused on chapter eleven, for there we learn that Atticus suffers from a moral blind spot, which prevents him from fully acknowledging his community's racism. Analyzing that chapter, this lesson offers students the opportunity to develop a critical perspective on Atticus's judgment and character. At the outset it is critical to emphasize how deeply embedded Atticus is in Maycomb. "He liked Maycomb," the narrator tells us early in the novel, "he was Maycomb County born and bred; he knew his people; they knew him.... Atticus was related by blood or marriage to nearly every family in the town." (p. 6) For Atticus the community of Maycomb is essentially a web of personal relationships. On one hand, this is commendable because it enables him to know the town's residents as individuals and to make allowances for their shortcomings and foibles. On the other hand, however, it is a problem because it denies him the critical distance needed to place those shortcomings and foibles in any larger moral context. We first become aware of Atticus's blind spot when he explains the Robinson case to his brother. It is essentially a lost cause thanks to "Maycomb's usual disease." "Why reasonable people go stark raving mad," he laments, "when anything involving a Negro comes up, is something I don't pretend to understand." (p. 117) This is a curious admission for the "Maycomb County born and bred" lawyer who knows his people. "Mrs. Dubose used to be a nigger-lover," the narrator tells us, "on her favorite subjects, her camellias and our father's nigger-loving propensities" (p. 144). Here, day after day, an adult, respected, indeed admired by their father and perhaps by the entire town, seeks to communicate the white supremacist heritage of the Old South to Jem and Scout, in effect to a new generation of Southerners. Yet Atticus cannot bring himself to point out how morally reprehensible that legacy is. He dismisses it as a set of views "a lot different" from his own and qualifies even that mild demur with "maybe" (p. 149). When he seeks to explain Mrs. Dubose's insults to Jem, his compassion amounts to evasion. "Jem," he says, "she is old and ill. You can't hold her responsible for what she says and does" (p. 140). Most certainly, he has long been aware of Mrs. Dubose's views on race. To attribute them now to her age and health is, like his bafflement over the roots of "Maycomb's usual disease," an example of his unwillingness to acknowledge fully his community's racism. In chapter 11 Scout, Jem, and Atticus judge the old woman. "Jem and I hated her," says Scout (p. 132). "She was vicious" (p. 133). "She was horrible" (p. 142). It is important to remind students that these judgments are not those of the six-year-old Scout or the nine-year-old Jem but rather those of the adult Scout, the narrator, who is looking back on her past and offering a considered assessment of it. And her assessment of Mrs. Dubose sharply contradicts that of Atticus who believed Mrs. Dubose to be "a great lady," "the bravest person" he ever knew (p. 149). Upon hearing Atticus describe her that way, Jem throws the candy box that contained her posthumous peace offering into the fire. What does this action suggest about his attitude toward Mrs. Dubose and his father's paean to her courage? Why does Atticus hold Mrs. Dubose in such esteem? The answer lies, perhaps, in the type of courage he attributes to her. According to Atticus, "real courage" is beginning a struggle "when you know you're licked before you begin" but beginning anyway and seeing it "it through no matter what" (p. 149). It is, in short, persisting in a lost cause. This is precisely the same sort of courage Atticus displays in his defense of Tom Robinson. "The jury," he tells his brother, "couldn't possibly be expected to take Tom Robinson's word against the Ewells" (p. 117). Atticus may identify with Mrs. Dubose, seeing in her struggle with morphine addiction a reflection of his struggle with the Robinson case. Who is correct about Mrs. Dubose, Atticus or his children? Was she a "great lady" or an "old hell-devil"? The lesson examines what she represents; how she functions in the novel, and how Scout, Jem, and Atticus respond to her. The children's view of her is very different from that of Atticus, and that sharp difference raises questions about Atticus's ability and willingness to acknowledge the racism of his community. Scout, Jem, and Atticus judge Mrs. Dubose, and this lesson asks you to judge their judgments. Text Analysis Mrs. Dubose and the Town Scout and Mrs. Dubose, from "To Kill A Mockingbird," 1962. 1. At the beginning of chapter 11 the narrator tell us that it was "impossible to go to town without passing" the home of Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose. What position does Mrs. Dubose's home occupy in Maycomb? If it is impossible for the Finch children to get to town without passing Mrs. Dubose's home, it must be impossible for many others, too. Thus her home is located at a key entry point to the heart of Maycomb. One might say that she controls the approach to the town from one direction. 2. "It was rumored," the narrator says, that Mrs. Dubose keeps a "CSA pistol" under her shawls. What does CSA stand for? Confederate States of America, the official name of the government that attempted to secede from the United States in 1861. 3. What does the fact that Mrs. Dubose concealment of a pistol is "rumored" suggest? Obviously, it suggests that no one knows for sure if she is concealing a gun, but it also suggests that she is enough of a public presence in the town to be the subject of the sort of speculation and discussion that spawn rumor. 4. When Scout and Jem pass her house, Mrs. Dubose is not simply sitting on her porch; she is "stationed" there. What connotations does the word "stationed" carry? It has military connotations, suggesting the placement of soldiers in strategic locations. 5. Considering that Mrs. Dubose's house controls a key approach to Maycomb's business district, that she may be armed, and that she "stations" herself on her porch, how does Harper Lee present her in the opening pages of chapter 11? She presents her as a sentinel or guard who is on watch to protect the town in some way. 6. What does Mrs. Dubose do from her outpost on the porch? She questions people who pass by, rather in the way a guard might. She also passes judgment on their behavior. 7. What does it suggest about Mrs. Dubose's opinions that she sometimes delivers them in a voice so loud the entire neighborhood can hear them? It suggests that her judgments have a public dimension, that she is speaking to the town. Considering what we learn about Maycomb's general attitude toward Atticus's defense of Tom Robinson — Scout tells him most folks think he is wrong — she is apparently speaking for the town as well. 8. When Jem and Scout pass her house, Mrs. Dubose insults their father. What is her main complaint against Atticus? That he has gone "against his raising," in other words, that he has betrayed his class, his family, and the traditions of the town in which he grew up, traditions that Mrs. Dubose represents and upholds in the public judgments she renders from her porch. 9. How do we know that Mrs. Dubose is trying to be deliberately hurtful with these remarks? When she sees Jem's response to her insult — "Jem stiffened" — she knew that her "shot had gone home," and she continues her taunting. 10. Why is it significant that the narrator tells us that Mrs. Dubose's insults "aimed at Atticus" were the first she had heard "from an adult"? Up to this point in the novel, only children, Cecil Jacobs and cousin Francis, have insulted Atticus. Their attacks carry less weight than those of adults, even though they may echo the opinions of adults. With Mrs. Dubose, however, an old and perhaps revered figure has passed judgment on Atticus's behavior. Given the role that she plays in Maycomb — that of town sentinel and public enforcer of its traditions — it is clear that she speaks for much of the community of Maycomb. Her words carry substantial weight. Mrs. Dubose and Her Camellias "Snow-on-the-Mountains" camelliasNote: To understand fully the symbolism of the camellias, it helps to know that the camellia is the state flower of Alabama and that it is associated with the Knights of the White Camellia, a Ku Klux Klan-like organization, founded in 1867, to enforce white supremacy in the post-Civil War South. 11. When Jem and Scout visit Mrs. Dubose to read to her, she "would hound Jem" on her "favorite subjects." What are they? Her camellias and Atticus's "nigger-loving propensities." 12. As we have seen, Harper Lee links Mrs. Dubose's camellias with her views on race and her insulting behavior toward Atticus and the children. How do these associations explain why Jem attacks the flowers? When Jem cuts the heads off the camellias, he is responding to the insults Mrs. Dubose she has delivered against his father and the Finch family. He cannot attack her, so he does the next best thing: he goes after her prized flowers. The camellias are a stand-in for the old lady herself. 13. After Jem attacks the flowers, Mrs. Dubose taunts him by saying that the blossoms have re-grown. Considering the associations that cluster around Mrs. Dubose's camellias, what does their re-growth symbolize? It symbolizes the resilience of the attitudes and values held by Mrs. Dubose. 14. In symbolic terms, what does Jem's admission that he would pull the camellia bushes up by their roots suggest? Together the camellias and Mrs. Dubose symbolize the old Confederate South whose attitudes toward race still deeply inform the community of Maycomb. Jem's admission that he would pull them up by the roots suggests that he stands in profound opposition to those attitudes. He is likely to be far less accepting of the tradition represented by Mrs. Dubose than his father is. Judging Mrs. Dubose 15. What causes does Atticus cite to account for what Mrs. Dubose says and does? He attributes her views and her behavior to her age and ill-health. 16. What other causes might he have cited? If, in preparing for the lesson, you had your students explore the events Mrs. Dubose experience growing up in the post-Civil War South, you might refer to that discussion here. She came of age when the ideology of white supremacy dominated Southern culture, and undoubtedly that culture had a powerful shaping effect on her. Harper Lee presents her as a living embodiment of it. She is frail and passing but nonetheless a potent public spokeswoman for the racism she grew up with. 17. Is Atticus letting Mrs. Dubose off too easily? Explain your answer. Some students will agree with Atticus that the old woman — sick, addled by morphine, and dying — should not be held responsible for her views or her behavior. But judging from what we see of her, neither her views nor her behavior is a recent development, resulting from the deterioration of her health. Apparently, she has launched her opinions from her front porch for some time, and Atticus may simply be resuming his bookish ways. But students may sense some slyness or complacency on Atticus's part as he settles in to read while his son broods. Clearly, he has not convinced Jem that Mrs. Dubose was a "great lady." The boy is in some way processing his confrontation with his father. Atticus seems unaware of the seriousness of what just happened. His retreat to his paper may amount to an evasion of the truth about Mrs. Dubose and about Maycomb itself. 26. In chapter 11 Jem, Scout, and Atticus judge Mrs. Dubose. "Jem and I hated her," says Scout. "She was vicious." "She was horrible." Yet Atticus considers her a "great lady," the "bravest person" he ever knew. Do you agree with the children or Atticus? Explain your answer. (Note to teacher: You may want to make the response to this question a follow-up written assignment.) Follow-Up Assignment Choose one of the following themes explored in chapter 11 of To Kill a Mockingbird: racism, the generation gap, the role of history in the present, or another theme as designated by your teacher. In what ways can you see this same theme present either in other literature or in our world today? Use specific examples to develop a comparison between chapter 11 and literature or the world today. Organize and construct a short (two minutes) oral presentation on your findings and share with your classmates. As you speak, be sure to begin with a clear thesis and give specific examples to prove your points. Text: Harper Lee, To Kill A Mockingbird, HarperCollins: 1960 (Grand Central Publishing edition: 1982), chapter 11. Images: Scout (Mary Badham) and Mrs. Dubose (Ruth White) in "To Kill A Mockingbird," 1962. Universal International Pictures, Silver Screen Collection. Scout (Mary Badham) and Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck) in "To Kill A Mockingbird," 1962. 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